



# The Family Tree

By **Pat Norton**, Golf Course Superintendent, Nettle Creek Country Club

So I turn around and look at myself on the back wall of my office. There is this young man looking back at me from the various stages of his younger life. This young buck looks pretty self-confident as he sits there, a mere college boy amongst the small crew from Blackhawk CC, circa 1980-1982.

In those black & white group photos I am surrounded by a bunch of guys that were very close back in those days. Young teenager Jim Berbee, younger teenager Mike Lee...the mane of hair and beard also known as Ric Lange...a very young, very blonde Tom Schwab, and a very self-assured Dave Helke are all there looking back at me. Everybody is young in this photo...even David Noltner, even Miller! There is a grand total of eleven guys in the group, including the only photo that I have of Vincent Noltner.

I have another great color photo of the eighteen guys who were on my crew back during the formation of Cedar Creek in Onalaska. In that 1991 photo are some familiar faces and some elusive names. That great group of guys proved simply that, at least in the rural areas (like western Wisconsin), 'white boys' still knew how to work and have fun doing it. Today, my golf course, like most others in NE Illinois, uses primarily Hispanic labor mixed with 3-4 senior retirees. Almost the same sense of camaraderie, but not quite...

Those two group photos are my visual connection with my golf course past. It is always a treat to sit back and reminisce about those days gone by...and about the people who have had a positive influence on your life. It's a treat also to ponder on what has become of them all...

Who can ever forget their first days and weeks of working on a golf course. It seemed comparable to a guy getting paid for habitation of a magic kingdom of golf course beauty. As a 19-year old, every golf course that I'd ever played on heretofore had been beautiful...in its own rough, under-maintained way. But this! This incredibly beautiful fairyland of golf was so visually stunning!

And then, to begin to understand how the work is performed and 'the look' is created. Every true golfer should work at least one summer on a golf course...the appreciation for the game and for golf maintenance would rise dramatically. I think that maybe we forget sometimes that our golfers should feel this same sense of visual overload, this sense of 'golf experience' each and every time they play our golf courses!

I'll never forget the sense of intimidation of first working with guys like Jeff Parks, David Noltner, and Vincent Noltner...who were the key guys in those days in helping Monroe create 'the look' at Blackhawk. I remember to this day that I always understood that I had at least four bosses...screwing something up and facing their scorn was something to be feared...but not as fearful as the wrath of Miller. We rookies implicitly understood the pecking order...and realized quite well that we were right down there at the bottom. But, if you kept the proper respect and had a strong work ethic, much could be learned, your contribution to the well being of the course would be noted, and respect implicitly given up the pecking order would begin to flow back down.

Interesting that in my two black and white photos are a total of seven guys, then in college and in



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training at Blackhawk...who are now superintendents. Interesting also how the 'family tree' from Blackhawk, Maple Bluff, and Nakoma in those days kept spreading and developing. Good men like Miller, Harrison, and Smith took and take the time to train numerous young men and help them along their way. Undoubtedly, many older guys reading this have developed their own family tree of superintendents and assistants over the years. Many younger guys are, no doubt, part of some golf course family tree and are starting to mentor their own tree.

In part, it's what this business is all about. None of us are ever going to be monetarily wealthy, if that is your goal, as a result of the years dedicated to golf course management. But, as we know, there are many types of wealth. We all have the opportunity to influence, train, and help people significantly through our work. The young men in my photos, and your also, are testament to that fact. Reflect back on those photos some winter afternoon. It will undoubtedly bring forth a few chuckles and some inspiration for the upcoming season.

Today is January 11...which means that we should be experiencing bone-chilling cold, brutal winds, and crusty, dirty snow...in other words, weather that tests your resolve. The reality today is a sun washed, beau-

tiful winter afternoon...looking out over a golf course with a strong green tint...and a stronger lure to it. It is the lure of the golf course that keeps us all...part of the family tree. It is the mixture of golf...and golf course management...that keeps us all growing and active in our family trees. In fact, I just commented to our golf professionals that the lure of the golf course this afternoon is so strong that it would be a shame not to crank a few shots off of our No. 10 blue tee! We in ChicagoLand all agree that global warming is a 21st century reality.

When I consult with my friend, Mr. Calendar, and plan out the remaining weeks of winter in my head...I realize that the amount of remaining winter shop work is considerable. Blended into the mix is the pro shop remodeling, the clubhouse interior painting, the policies and procedures manual to be rewritten, the re-permitting of our mixing/loading station, the re-certification for pesticide application, and the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program that is once again up for consideration. Although certainly not requiring 60-70 hours weekly...the above is truly enough to keep us all busily employed.

We have made it successfully through the holidays...with more than enough treats and holiday alcohol consumed into the body...college students are on the verge of starting their spring semester...and spring is only six to eight weeks away down here in the flatlands! The lure of the course and the chance to bring employees together for another season does generate a sense of excitement that builds as the holidays fade and spring approaches.

We'll be expected and ready for opening by March 17...St. Patty's Day! So, we all have six to eight additional weeks in which to prepare for the annual battle. Those trusted lieutenants in my family tree will be well rested and ready to get outdoors. They will have had enough of indoor winter work...and eagerly anticipate the chance to flex their outdoor muscle. The others in my current photo...who work seasonally...will undoubtedly visit me in the next couple of weeks...looking for both a start date and their "augmento", or raise.

So, in addition to looking back and reflecting on those who have helped us be a part of their family tree...we can look forward a few weeks and anticipate that our family tree will leaf out once more...as a new golf season begins.

Remember to take a group photo this season...which is something that I usually postpone. In 2006, therefore, I resolve to take a group photo of my family tree. It will become something to look back upon...something to help identify those who have come and gone...and something to help in triggering a memory of those who have helped along your way...or that you are helping along their way. ♣



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